



# RETAILER PROFILE: ART INCORPORATED

## An interview with Robert Grothues

By Kimberly Biesiada

● Robert Grothues, MCPF (third from right) with staff members Deborah Hill, MCPF (from left), Christopher Laune, Dean Cardenas, Bonnie Dietering, and Wayne Grothues.

For Robert Grothues, MCPF, owning a frame shop means continuing a family legacy. His business, Art Incorporated, which he co-operates with sisters Patti Menn and Cathie Clark, was founded in 1968 by his parents, A.J. and Joan Grothues. In the beginning, it was a self-service art supply store in a suburb of San Antonio, TX. After seeing early success, A.J. Grothues moved into a 1,200-square-foot retail space on the northwest side of the city; his wife kept the books. Grothues later bought a hobby store and acquired its framing materials and equipment, and Art Incorporated began offering custom framing.

In the late 1970s, the business moved again to an older, wealthier part of San Antonio, tripling in size and discontinuing art supply sales. Framing became its core. Robert Grothues was attending community college in San Antonio at the time, but he was more interested in the family business than school. In 1988, shortly after the family lost its patriarch, Grothues and his siblings moved Art Incorporated into the building it still occupies today.

Grothues, Menn, and Clark are celebrating Art Incorporated's 50th anniversary this year. The business is still located in San Antonio, in an 11,000-square-foot building with an art gallery and frame design space. And much like the city itself,

Art Incorporated is still growing.

In an interview with PFM, Grothues discusses how he sets Art Incorporated apart from competitors, what it's like to co-manage the family business, and why he still attends framing classes.

**Art Incorporated has seen many changes over the last 50 years, but it's always been in the San Antonio area. What's unique about your location, and who are your customers?**

San Antonio is a growing city; we're the seventh largest city in the U.S., which a lot of people don't know. We have a very large military community, both retired and active. We see a fair amount of military business—not a huge amount, but we do frame a fair number of military awards and medals.

I'd say the majority of our customers are women between 40 and 65. Many are long-term; we have a lot of third-generation customers. I have seen more young people recently. We're constantly trying to groom new customers as our client base ages.

**What services do you offer your customers?**

We offer frame design for artwork that customers bring in; we also procure and create some artwork for customers. We sell a lot of photography and original paintings and sculpture in the gallery. We



● From humble beginnings as a self-service art supply business, Art Incorporated has grown over the last 50 years into a major player in the custom framing market. The 11,000-square-foot retail location also includes an art gallery.

also offer corporate art services; establishing budgets, planning. We work with interior designers, planners, and architects, or directly with the corporate employees involved in the project. We offer handmade, artisan gifts, as well; we do fairly good business during the big gift-giving holidays like Christmas and Valentine's Day. We also offer installation.

**That's a great add-on that not everyone offers.**

It's turned into quite a large business; it's pretty much what I do all during the week, now. I do installation along with two other installers, and most of my framers know how to install, too. We have a large staff we can call on at a moment's notice. I also use it as a sales tool. Most of the time, I come back with some more framing work for the company and establish good personal relationships with customers.

And then you end up hanging the odd toilet paper holder or curtain rod—under duress, I do that! In San Antonio, we hang an awful lot of animal mounts.

**You're very diverse in what you offer, from framing to art sales to corporate work. What does your revenue breakdown look like?**

I would say custom framing is probably 70 percent, with everything else being the other 30. Sometimes it varies, but that's probably about the average. We've had some years where we've had very good art sales and it gets into 60/40. Sometimes the big commercial jobs, where we're selling art and doing framing, brings in business for art sales, so that percentage goes up and down from month to month. We still do an amazing amount of framing.

**Describe your store—how is it laid out, what kind of parking does it have?**

We have an enormous amount of parking for our shop—we have about 30 spaces in our lot. We have two entrances; one facing the south side and one facing the east side of the building. One entrance leads into the gallery area, and the other goes to the retail framing area.

We also own a second frame shop. Four years ago, we bought a business in the Alamo Heights area of San Antonio. It was another existing frame shop as old as mine. We have completely transformed it into a new business; it isn't Art Incorporated, it's Barry Framing, and it has its own personality and its own staff. I have some wonderful employees down there—I hardly even have to go down there. So we get to focus on Art Incorporated.



● Custom framing accounts for over half of Art Incorporated's revenue, according to Grothues.



● The staff's many framing competition awards are prominently displayed in the shop beside the winning pieces. Grothues says they often inspire customers looking for design ideas—a few people have even offered to buy the winners right off the wall.

porated, they get to focus on Barry Framing, and both companies are making money.

**Speaking of employees, what is the size of the staff at Art Incorporated? Do they have specialized job titles, like art sales, fitters, gilders?**

I have 12 employees. I have six framers on staff and an additional framer that is mostly working in sales now. My two sisters normally work in sales on the counter and in the gallery. I cross-train almost everybody, but everybody has their strengths, so they kind of fall into those things. Sometimes they push to do a little bit more (in one area), and I always encourage it; but sometimes, especially when we get into the commercial aspect of it, we work more in an assembly line type of structure where everybody has their dedicated job. Most of the people in the back are cross-trained: we recently purchased a new Valiani large format cutter that everybody is training on now. In addition to that cutter, a lot of people are also familiar with the Wiz-

ard machinery we use. They actually know much more about that stuff than I do, now!

**What's the average tenure for your employees?**

Probably 10 years. We tend to keep our employees a long time.

**What's the key to keeping good people?**

Treating them even better than they deserve! Kidding aside, I really feel my employees are knowledgeable adults, they know what they're doing, and they know what needs to be done—and they get it done.

**Running a family business has its unique rewards and challenges. How do you make it work?**

We each have our strengths in the business, and we kind of dedicate ourselves to those. I think we cross over when necessary—when somebody's on vacation, we curse their name and wish they were back doing their job so we don't have to do it!



● Art Incorporated sells original paintings and sculpture in its gallery space, and handmade artisan gifts are also available.

We really each have our strengths, but we're all customer-focused—every one of us. I think that's why it really works, because the customers dictate what our job is. We're in a voluntary, luxury business, and you have to create an environment for the customer that's like no other so they say, 'Wow, that was a nice experience.' We all strive to do that. I focus on the idea of being customer-driven when training my staff, and I definitely focus on it when I'm helping customers, from over the phone to in their house to a first-time customer walking in the door.

**Looking back, what's one thing you wish someone in the industry had told you when you started?**

Probably the technology aspect of it. One thing that really helped us was when we computerized—we could better keep track of customers' work and other organizational things within the business. It's really changed the business.

It was at industry trade shows where we ended up learning those things. We always go to the West Coast Art & Frame Expo and The National Conference—I've probably been going to that since it was founded. Last year, I took four employees with me. I always try to learn as much as I can about the industry.

**Why do you prioritize the trade show/conference?**

I think I've taken every class that's ever been offered; some of them more than once. I've always gotten something out of them. Even a class I didn't enjoy, I picked up one or two things to keep in the back of my head and use when the opportunity arises.

The networking is also really good; I participate in our chapter of PPFA, and know many people in the business that are healthy competitors and good friends. Sometimes we share customers, and sometimes we steal customers. Sometimes, they give customers to us if a project is more complex or involved. I've always had an open shop. If I can help another framer in the area, I do, because I think promoting the business of picture framing is one of the best things we can do. I think the pie is extremely small for the population that could use our services, and it's a matter of they just don't know what we do.

I think what I also get out of the WCAF Expo is it makes me feel like I'm more in a profession. I'm not a hobbyist; I have a business, and I am a professional. I



● Clockwise from left: staff members John Clark and Adam Clark; co-owners Patti Menn and Cathie Clark.

think the show kind of expands the thought of that, and being with people who are successful and sharing ideas is a great thing.

**Art Incorporated has won numerous framing awards, some of which have been announced at the show. How do you use the fact that you're an award-winning frame shop to boost your business?**

We have all our award-winning frames on display around the shop, along with the ribbons. We try to point it out to people. Most people notice them on their own, and they get inquisitive and go, 'What is all this?' Then we give them the story of the competitions and how many times we've won. Some of the clients want to buy the pieces, and most of my framers go, 'I'm not selling that!' So I say, well, we can make them another one like it. The pieces do inspire people. And it's fun; all my framers like competing. I always encourage them to do it. If they want to try something different, I'm always totally supportive of it.

**I'm starting to understand why your employees stay so long. You sound like a great boss.**

I try to be! I think if I cornered them, most people would probably say I am.

**What advice would you give to a new shop owner?**

Do what you say you will; better yet, do more than promised. Show your customer the most beautiful frame design you can create, and price it appropriately. Create a store that gives your customers an experience. Visit other successful frame shops and retail stores. Educate and train yourself and your team. Finally, enjoy what you do—and charge for it! **PFM**